



To the Commissioners of the Fair Political Practices Commission,

As a sponsor of SB 1170, California Women's List thanks the FPPC for its attention to this bill as well as the invaluable technical drafting assistance provided by Senior Legislative Counsel Lindsey Nakano. We are writing to respond to the thoughtful points the Commission has raised and note the new amendments that will be incorporated to SB 1170.

As you already know, SB 1170 was spurred by new research showing the causal link between campaign hostility and candidate mental health and the impacts for campaign decision-making. Recent research by Princeton University showed that candidates in California faced the most hostility on the campaign trail ("more than expected" even when calibrated for population). Last year, California Women's List surveyed over 100 candidates who had run for office and found that over 80% of candidates experienced online abuse and over 50% of candidates experienced harassment at least once. Campaign hostility was disproportionately directed at underrepresented candidates—with over 40% of women reporting stalking on the campaign trail compared to 27.3% of men and over one-third of LGBTQ+ women and women of color experiencing physical violence directed toward them on the campaign trail compared to just 13.6% of men. Experiences with campaign hostility had real impacts on candidates mental health, with approximately 80% of all respondents reporting new or worsened mental health symptoms that were caused, in whole or in part, by hostility experienced during the campaign. Worsened candidate mental health impacts not just the candidate but the campaign as a whole, with nearly 50% of women stating that they changed their campaign tactics or strategy due to concerns about safety or well-being. Similar research by the Brennan Center has shown that hostility can impact mental health of officeholders as well and spur decisions to limit constituent interactions, shy away from hot-button policy issues, or withdraw from public service altogether.

This new research demonstrates why mental health expenses stemming from campaign hostilities should be understood as political expenses, rather than personal ones. The Political Reform Act distinguishes personal expenses as those which confer substantial personal benefit with *no more* than negligible government, political, or legislative purpose. Allowing campaign funds to be used for mental healthcare has **a significant political purpose**. A large share of candidates have changed their campaign strategies—from voter outreach to communications—because of the mental health impacts of campaign hostility. But for the campaign, candidates would not have experienced the hostilities that are the root cause of their new or worsened mental health symptoms. **Because these mental health impacts are campaign-created liabilities, addressing them should be considered campaign-related expenses.**

In allowing campaign funds to be used to address mental health impacts of campaign hostilities, SB 1170 advances the underlying purposes of the Political Reform Act. With the helpful feedback of the Commission and technical drafting assistance of Ms. Nakano, we are





working with the author's office to take these amendments as the bill is progressing from the Senate to the Assembly:

- **Addressing the question about how to facilitate reporting that will not burden or expose candidates:** SB 1170 will be amended to define three categories of campaign hostility: 1) harassment, 2) prejudice, 3) A threat or other criminal act. A candidate will need only note which of the three categories of campaign hostility has given rise to their need to use campaign funds for mental healthcare expenses, without describing the underlying events in any further detail.
- **Addressing the question of what records would need to be maintained to allow for proper auditing:** SB 1170 will be amended to require candidates to maintain invoices from the provider to show that campaign funds were being used by a licensed provider as required by SB 1170. No details of treatment would be divulged.
- **Addressing the question of timeline:** SB 1170 will be amended to allow campaign funds to be used from the date a committee is opened until either the date that the Secretary of State certifies the campaign results or, for prevailing candidates, until the date they are sworn in.
- **Addressing the question of incumbent exclusions:** SB 1170 will be amended so that any candidate who does not have health insurance that fully covers mental healthcare may use campaign funds. This change would allow local incumbents serving on a part-time basis who are not provided health insurance to avail themselves of SB 1170.

California Women's List has been grateful for the feedback of the Commission and believes that these changes have made SB 1170 a stronger bill to support candidates facing campaign hostilities. As sponsors of the bill, we hope to earn the Commission's support of SB 1170.

Best,  
Marissa Roy  
President, California Women's List






# HER STORIES

*on the Campaign Trail*

Analyzing the Mental Health Impacts  
of Hostility Women Face Pursuing  
Political Office in California

A FIRST OF ITS KIND STUDY



We started this project after hearing story after story of the hostility women faced running for office, a burden that they too often had to shoulder alone. **To all of the courageous women who have fought and struggled—succeeded and were knocked down—who work every day to get back up and fight for a more just and equitable California, this report is dedicated to you.** Know that California Women’s List is always here to support you.

# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
INTRODUCTION	7
GENERAL BACKGROUND	10
METHODOLOGY	15
RESULTS	20
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	33

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*This report was developed in collaboration with researchers, mental health experts, political leaders, and organizations that are dedicated to creating a political culture where women running for office can thrive. We want to acknowledge contributors, collaborators, and sponsors of this project below.*

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# California needs more women in elected office.

When women are elected, they pass on average twice as many bills (Center for American Women and Politics 2017), and they legislate intersectionally because they legislate with everyone in mind. Women pass bills that effectively address issues impacting women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, service workers, immigrants and mixed status families, tenants, and the next generation. But, in California's 174-year history, only 192 women have served in the state legislature—less than 5% of the 4,496 total state legislators—and California has never elected a woman governor.

That is because women still face significant barriers while running for office. Some are well-documented, such as the gender gap in fundraising: women in congressional races, for example, raise on average \$500,000 less than men in competitive races. (Cook Political Report 2018).

## Other barriers are less visible.

When women run for office, they face a barrage of hostilities: double-standards, demeaning and demoralizing criticism, harassment, sexism and misogyny, threats, stalking, and even violence. These experiences force women to change their campaign tactics for their own safety and ultimately, the sum of these experiences can take a toll on candidates' mental health and well-being.

We have not known the full picture of this hostility because our political culture has not viewed it as a problem. For far too long, the hostility—and ensuing effects—that women candidates face has been accepted and dismissed as simply “what you signed up for.”

While women can and have persevered through these challenges to win their elections, we at California Women's List ask: Should they *have* to?

California Women's List is a political action committee that has endorsed, elected, and fundraised for nearly 100 women running for office at the state and local levels in California over the past six years. Over the course of our work with women candidates, we have heard their stories and their struggles. We have seen first-hand the hostility that women face as they put everything on the line to serve their communities. We appreciate and honor their courage to run in the face of this hostility and the toll it takes. But women are signing up to serve their communities, *not* to put themselves or their families at risk.

# So, we are saying *enough*.

California Women's List aims to shine a light on the hostility women face running for office and change the narrative around what political culture we are building throughout California. This year, we launched a groundbreaking study to measure the disproportionate hostility women face running for office in California and understand the ensuing impacts on mental health.

## Our survey collected 103 responses from people of various gender identities who ran for office in California between 2016 and 2022.

We have analyzed these results and they are deeply troubling:

- **Women running for office face disproportionate hostility compared to male counterparts.** Nearly two-thirds of women (65.38%) experienced harassment during their campaign, compared to 50% of men. Alarming, 42.31% of all women experienced stalking at least once during their campaign (and nearly one in five women experienced stalking frequently or very frequently), a full 15 points higher compared to 27.27% of men (most of whom experienced stalking only rarely). The data was even more stark for women of color—54.76% of whom experienced stalking at least once during their campaign (28.57% reporting experiencing stalking frequently or very frequently)—and LGBTQ+ women, 53.33% of whom experienced stalking during their campaign.
- **Women experienced serious mental health symptoms as a result of this hostility.** Over half of women experienced frequent or very frequent fatigue or loss of energy (64.1%), sleep disturbance (65.38%), or excessive anxiety or worry (50%). And 43.59% of women experienced recurrent, unexpected panic attacks.
- **Nearly half of women (44.87%) have had to change their campaign strategies due to concerns about their safety and well-being.**

What we have concluded is that the current political culture is **unacceptable.**

*All candidates reported alarmingly high experiences of harassment, threats, and violence, but it is clear that women face this hostility in greater proportion, particularly true for women of color and LGBTQ+ women. It is entirely understandable that this degree of hostility would take a toll.*

**This report is a call to action.**

*Whether you are an elected official, a member of a political party, club, or organization, a voter, or a consumer of social media, we all have a role to play in building a better political culture, one that uplifts women, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ leaders rather than tries to tear them down. It is time we use our collective power to eradicate hostility against women and gender-expansive people in politics.*

We encourage you to read this report and join us to **build a better political culture.**

# GENERAL BACKGROUND

Women are underrepresented at all levels of elected office in the United States, making up just 32% of municipal officeholders in cities over 10,000 people, 32.7% of all state legislators, and 28% of United States Congressmembers (Center for American Women and Politics 2023).

Even though women’s representation in elected office is higher in California, women have yet to reach parity at any level of office. Only 39.7% of California’s municipal officeholders in cities over 10,000 people are women, with California’s largest city Los Angeles only electing its first woman Mayor Karen Bass last year. Although a record number of women were elected to the California state legislature in 2022, less than half of our state legislators identify as women (41.7%). At the federal level, less than one-third (32.7%) of California’s United States Congressmembers are women. And, California has never elected a woman Governor. We still have a long way to go to achieve parity.

Numerous factors contribute to the lack of women in elected leadership. Research on gender disparity in elected office has focused on several types of barriers to women’s political leadership, examining both internal and external factors that affect the “supply” of women running for office and “demand” for women’s leadership.

We summarize these studies at three levels:

1. Studies examining **structural barriers** keeping women out of elected office
2. Studies examining **social barriers** that women face on the campaign trail
3. Studies examining **internal factors** that cause women to self-select out of running for office in the first place.

**39.7%**

OF CALIFORNIA'S  
MUNICIPAL  
OFFICEHOLDERS  
IN CITIES OVER  
10,000 PEOPLE  
ARE WOMEN.

**41.7%**

OF CALIFORNIA'S  
STATE  
LEGISLATORS  
IDENTIFY AS  
WOMEN.

**32.7%**

OF CALIFORNIA'S  
UNITED STATES  
CONGRESS  
MEMBERS ARE  
IDENTIFY AS  
WOMEN.

# STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

*Structural barriers are those that emanate from the political system itself, perpetuating the lack of representation that has been ingrained in our political system.*

Well-documented incumbency advantages have benefitted those currently in positions of power who are statistically more likely to be (wealthy, older, white, cisgender, heterosexual) men (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994). In tandem with this incumbency advantage, people in political power have acted as gatekeepers to elected office, where they have tended to support men over women (Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2006; Crowder-Meyer 2013). This gatekeeping happens not only when women are seeking support for their campaigns, but long before when women are trying to build the credentials that are traditionally valued in political spaces (Conway, Steuernagel, and Ahern 2005). As women are blocked from gaining these credentials and building critical relationships, they are further isolated from the institutional and structural support that men cultivate from those in power in our political system.

Without the support of these gatekeepers and institutional power players, women have a harder time accessing networks to fundraise for their campaigns.

## Women running for Congress raise on average \$500,000 less than male counterparts

(Cook Political Report 2018)

This deficiency stems not from a lack of effort—women often fundraise from more individuals but at lower amounts—but from a lack or denial of access to key fundraising networks. For example,

in congressional races, winners fundraise on average 32% of their campaign contributions from PACs, which overwhelmingly support cis gender men, particularly incumbents who are more likely to be white (Ascend Fund 2021).

Although there are national and California state PACs that specifically focus on supporting women running for office, like EMILY's List, Elect Democratic Women, National Women's Political Caucus, Fund Her, Run Women Run, Vote Mama, Her Bold Move, California Women's List, the Democratic Woman's Club of San Diego County, and San Francisco Women's Political Committee, the broader ecosystem of high-dollar political donors continues to favor male candidates.

These structural disadvantages are further compounded for women who are members of other groups historically excluded from politics, including women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and working class women. Women of color have been found to be less likely to be recruited by political parties and more likely to be discouraged from running (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh 2009). One report on campaign contributions found that “female candidates of color received an average of around \$330,000, compared to around \$450,000 for men of color, and almost \$700,000 for white candidates of both genders” (Center for Responsive Politics, Common Cause and Representation 2020). The combination of their race and gender can put women of color at an electoral disadvantage (Githens and Prestage 1977).



**\$330K**

AVERAGE  
AMOUNT RAISED  
BY FEMALE  
CANDIDATES OF  
COLOR

**\$450K**

AVERAGE  
AMOUNT RAISED  
BY MEN OF  
COLOR

**\$700K**

AVERAGE  
AMOUNT RAISED  
BY WHITE  
CANDIDATES,  
REGARDLESS OF  
GENDER

## SOCIAL BARRIERS

*Social barriers are those that emanate from our society at large.*

**Misinformation:** false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive (Oxford Languages)

**Disinformation:** false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Women's lack of representation in government and the exclusion they face from powerful political gatekeepers contributes to a public perception that sees men, not women, as leaders. Systemic exclusion and patriarchal and misogynistic social norms influence voters' understandings of who is a viable and "electable" leader (Conway 2001) and perpetuate negative gendered stereotypes about leadership (Schneider and Bos 2014).

Patriarchal bias against women in leadership not only impacts voting patterns, but also perpetuates social hostility against women attempting to break rigid

gender norms that bar women from positions of powers. Many studies show that women candidates and politicians face disproportionate online abuse. As Rheault, Rayment and Musulan (2019) write, "a seemingly inescapable feature of the digital age is that people choosing to devote their lives to politics must now be ready to face a barrage of insults and disparaging comments targeted at them through social media." Among highly visible politicians, women in politics are more heavily targeted by uncivil users or accounts on Twitter (X) than men. Research from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2022) found similarly that women candidates are regularly targeted by abusive online content, especially during elections, facing nearly twice as much abuse on Twitter (X) as their male counterparts during the 2020 U.S. election as well as targeted abusive hashtags on TikTok and Instagram in the lead-up to the 2022 election. In a Center for Democracy and Technology study of 2020 U.S. congressional candidates, Thakur and Hankerson (2022) found that

women of color were twice as likely as other candidates to be the subject of mis- and disinformation on Twitter. Candidates and staff they interviewed suggested that the negative tweets seemed intended to intimidate women of color to withdraw from politics.

Misogyny not only motivates and drives online abuse, but can escalate to disproportionate threats, harassment, and political violence against women. In their comprehensive 2022 Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset report observing 400 unique incidents between 2020 and 2022, Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative found that women local officials were targeted at a higher frequency than others, an estimated 3.4 times more than men. Out of the 400 unique incidents of threats and harassment against local officials between 2020 and 2022 included in the Bridging Divides Initiative's 2022 report, California had the highest number of incidents observed in any state with 64, more incidents than expected based on population. The report's authors posit that the high number of incidents could be due to high ideological heterogeneity, and caution that they are likely amplified by high population and greater capacity of news coverage in comparison with small states.

But these findings of disproportionate hostility in California appear substantiated by studies conducted locally, too. For example, at the local level, efforts to map the threat environment of San Diego's elected officials at the University of San Diego's Violence, Inequality, and Power Lab (VIP Lab) and Institute for Civil Civic Engagement (ICCE) find in a survey of 328 elected officials that 82% of San Diego's women local elected officials report being threatened or harassed, as opposed to 66% of men. Of those who have received threats, 61% of women

elected officials reported that they have considered leaving public service entirely because of these threats, as opposed to 32% of men. It appears that California's political landscape may be particularly hostile for women.

3.4x

Women local officials are 3.4x more likely to be the targets of harassment or threats

64

California has the highest amount of unique incidents of threat or harassment against local officials, sitting at 64 in just 2022.

# INTERNAL BARRIERS

*There are also barriers internalized by women running for office or considering running for office.*

Women see the gatekeepers of political power that seek to exclude them from running for office, understand the steep challenges in fundraising, and are keenly aware of the social hostility that women disproportionately face when they seek leadership. As the editors of a recent volume on women's candidacies point out, “[with] the personal and financial costs of running for office are high [and]. . . [g]iven the vitriol in recent elections and the high level of hyperpartisanship, negative advertising, and animosity in even lower-level elections, it is fair to ask: Why would anyone run for office?” (Shames et al. 2020: 2).

Women have every reason to perceive running for office as unappealing. Running for office can be difficult and unpleasant due to the harsh and polarized political environment and rampant hostility, and the costs are even higher for those who lack the privileges of wealth, whiteness, and masculinity. An extremely negative perception of the political arena is widely shared. Political scientist Shauna Shames (2017) finds, for example, that millennials often cite presumed corruption and brokenness as a

reason not to get involved in politics at all. The lack of visible women leaders as role models (Atkeson 2003; Bos and Schneider 2017) may further entrench a sense of exclusion that leads women to reject political ambition at a higher rate than men (Lawless and Fox 2010).

Women also have valid safety concerns that deter them running for office. Confronting copious evidence that women face outsized threats of harassment, hostility, and political violence, women are deciding that running for office is not worth these safety risks. A 2012 report by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox found that women were significantly more likely than men to be deterred from running for office due to reasons including privacy concerns and potentially engaging in a negative campaign. Justifying their concerns about negativity are examples such as congressional candidate Kim Weaver's withdrawal from her 2016 race due to “very alarming acts of intimidation, including death threats” (Doyle 2017).

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**The combination of structural, social, and internal barriers create a culture that deters women from running for office and negatively affects the women who do make the brave choice to run. While we know that all of these barriers influence women seeking political leadership, what has not been measured is the cumulative effect of these disadvantages and hostility on women candidates' mental health and well-being.**

# METHODOLOGY

## FOR CANDIDATE WELLNESS SURVEY

Over the course of working with nearly 100 women running for state and local office throughout California, we at California Women's List have observed first-hand the cumulative barriers and hostility impacting women running for office. We have heard stories of women candidates facing unfair double-standards, receiving a barrage of online harassments, being stalked, and facing threats of violence. And, we have seen the toll that this takes on women running for office. Some have even suspended their campaigns because of this abuse.

**While many of these barriers have been studied separately, what has been missing from the discourse on barriers women candidates face is an understanding of how these barriers combine to affect women running for office at a personal level on the campaign trail.**

At the beginning of 2022, California Women's List set out to bring this narrative to light. Combining the expertise of researcher Sarah Carson, PhD, and mental health professional Jocelyn Tapia, LMFT, we built a survey to measure both the hostility that women face running for office compared to men and the impacts that disproportionate hostility has on women's mental health and well-being. Below we explain our methodology in further detail.

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### Eligibility

*To qualify to participate in the survey, individuals must have been a candidate for public office in California between 2016 and 2022. The survey was open to all previous candidates, regardless of gender, race, registered political party, or the particular public office they held or sought to attain.*

### Survey Breakdown

- 1. Overall Candidate Experiences on the Campaign Trail**
- 2. Societal Treatment and Candidate Response**
- 3. Identifying Adverse Experiences,**
- 4. Candidate Health and Wellbeing Effects**
- 5. Candidacy Questions**
- 6. Demographic Questions**

## Overall Candidate Experiences on the Campaign Trail

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Respondents were asked to share their experiences across a broad range of campaign activities, including interactions with voters, opponents, and the media; fundraising; and staff recruitment, among other activities.

## Identifying Adverse Experiences

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Respondents were asked to select from a checklist of hostile experiences they faced on the campaign trail, ranging from social media abuse to threats, harassment, and stalking.

## Candidacy Questions

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Respondents were asked to provide basic information about their most recent campaign between 2016 and 2022. Information collected included year of election, election type, candidate status, type of race, level of office sought, campaign outcome, party affiliation, county location, gender breakdown of competitors, and number of competitors. This context allowed researchers to understand and adequately compare experiences of respondents running different kinds of campaigns.

## Societal Treatment and Candidate Response

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This section asked respondents to reflect on their experiences and how seriously they felt others took their campaign. This section also asked whether respondents felt pressure to change their physical appearance or personality, concede their race, if they felt their personal life was unfairly scrutinized, and more were explored.

## Candidate Health and Wellbeing Effects

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Respondents were asked to select from a checklist of negative mental health and wellbeing impacts during their campaigns, from excessive worry and sleep disturbance to panic attacks and other symptoms. The list was developed in partnership with a licensed therapist, and included symptoms commonly associated with conditions such as depression and anxiety.

## Demographic Questions

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Respondents were asked to provide self-selected identification information including, racial/ethnicity identity, religion/spiritual practice, sexual identity/orientation, age, immigrant/first-gen, class identity, and disability status. This context allowed researchers to compare and contrast campaign experiences across demographic groups.

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*Questions regarding candidate experience, particularly with adverse events, were informed by anecdotes and feedback from California Women's List-endorsed candidates and analyzed to explore identity-based inequalities discussed by political researchers.*

# Respondent Demographics

The survey received 103 eligible responses from people who had run for office in California between 2016 and 2022. Of the respondents, 75.73% identify as cisgender or transgender women and 21.36% as cis-gender men. The majority of respondents (53.39%) are people of color.<sup>1</sup> Nearly one-quarter (24.27%) of respondents are LGBTQ+.<sup>2</sup>

As candidates, 56.31% of respondents were first-time candidates. Nearly half (48.54%) ran in open races. Race outcomes were almost equally represented with 49.51% of respondents recording wins and 50.49% recording losses.

Not all groups were represented among respondents. Only one respondent was transgender (thus, when we refer to the experiences of women in the results, we are including cisgender and transgender women, but when we are referring to “men,” our respondents only reflect cisgender men).

Additionally, none of the respondents were Republicans, so the results we record may not reflect the experiences of Republican candidates. The vast majority of the respondents ran as candidates in municipal or county races, so state and federal election dynamics may not be as well represented in the results analysis. Finally, most respondents were concentrated in populous areas of California, notably the Bay Area, Los Angeles County, and San Diego County; the experiences of candidates in less populous areas of California, including the Central Valley and northernmost counties, may not be as well-reflected. We hope that further research will fill these gaps and uplift the stories of candidates who are not captured in this survey.

## FULL DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS ON RESPONDENTS

### Year of Election - 103 respondents

2022 - 55.34% (57)  
2021 - 1.94% (2)  
2020 - 27.18% (28)  
2019 - 2.91% (3)  
2018 - 8.74% (9)  
2017 - 0.97 % (1)  
2016 - 2.91% (3)

### Candidate Status - 103 respondents

First time - 56.31% (58)  
Incumbent/re-election - 17.48% (18)  
Current elected/new race - 15.53% (16)  
Ran before/not incumbent - 10.67% (11)

### Type of Race - 103 respondents

Open seat - 48.54% (50)  
Challenging incumbent/same party - 19.42% (20)  
Challenging incumbent/diff party - 13.59% (14)  
Running as Incumbent - 18.45% (19)

### Level of Office Sought - 103 respondents

Municipal - 66.02% (68)  
County - 15.53% (16)  
State - 15.53% (16)  
National - 2.91% (3)

<sup>1</sup> While some respondents picked multiple terms to describe their race and ethnicity, 55 of 103 respondents indicated that they belong to communities of color.

<sup>2</sup> While some respondents picked multiple terms to describe their sexual orientation, 25 of 103 respondents indicated that they belong to the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Campaign Outcome - 103 respondents**

Win - 49.51% (51)  
Loss - 50.49% (52)

### **Party Affiliation - 103 respondents**

Democrat - 98.06% (101)  
Republican - 0% (0)  
Independent - 0.97% (1)  
Other - 0.97% (1)

### **County Location - 103 respondents**

Alameda - 5.83% (6)  
Alpine - 0% (0)  
Amador - 0% (0)  
Butte - 0% (0)  
Calaveras - 0% (0)  
Colusa - 0% (0)  
Contra Costa - 3.88% (4)  
Del Norte - 0% (0)  
El Dorado - 0.97% (1)  
Fresno - 0.97% (1)  
Glenn - 0% (0)  
Humboldt - 0% (0)  
Imperial - 0% (0)  
Inyo - 0% (0)  
Kern - 0% (0)  
Kings - 0% (0)  
Lake - 0% (0)  
Lassen - 0% (0)  
Los Angeles - 37.86% (39)  
Madera - 0% (0)  
Marin - 0% (0)  
Mariposa - 0% (0)  
Mendocino - 0% (0)  
Merced - 0% (0)  
Modoc - 0% (0)  
Mono - 0% (0)  
Monterey - 0.97% (1)  
Napa - 0% (0)  
Nevada - 0% (0)  
Orange - 4.85% (5)  
Placer - 0.97% (1)  
Plumas - 0% (0)  
Riverside - 1.94% (2)  
Sacramento - 3.88% (4)  
San Benito - 0% (0)  
San Bernardino - 0.97% (1)  
San Diego - 11.65% (12)  
San Francisco - 1.94% (2)

San Joaquin - 6.80% (7)  
San Luis Obispo - 1.94% (2)  
San Mateo - 2.91% (3)  
Santa Barbara - 0.97% (1)  
Santa Clara - 4.85% (5)  
Santa Cruz - 0% (0)  
Shasta - 0% (0)  
Sierra - 0% (0)  
Siskiyou - 0% (0)  
Solano - 2.91% (3)  
Sonoma - 0.97% (1)  
Stanislaus - 0.97% (1)  
Sutter - 0% (0)  
Tehama - 0% (0)  
Trinity - 0% (0)  
Tulare - 0% (0)  
Tuolumne - 0% (0)  
Ventura - 0% (0)  
Yolo - 0.97% (1)  
Yuba - 0% (0)

### **Number of Candidates in the Race (including self) - 103 respondents**

1 - 4.85% (5)  
2 - 21.36% (22)  
3 - 25.24% (26)  
4 - 14.56% (15)  
5 - 9.71% (10)  
6 - 7.77% (8)  
7 - 5.83% (6)  
8 - 2.91% (3)  
9 - 0.97% (1)  
10 - 1.94% (2)  
11 - 2.91% (3)  
12 - 0.97% (1)  
20 - 0.97% (1)

### **Gender Identity - 103 respondents<sup>1</sup>**

Agender - 0.97% (1)  
Cisgender Man - 21.36% (22)  
Cisgender Woman - 74.76% (77)  
Gender Non-conforming - 0.97% (1)  
Gender Variant - 0% (0)  
Genderqueer - 1.94% (2)  
Intersex - 0% (0)  
Non-binary - 1.94% (2)  
Transgender Man - 0% (0)  
Transgender Woman - 0.97% (1)

<sup>1</sup> Some respondents picked multiple terms to describe their gender identity.

## Race & Ethnicity - 103 respondents<sup>1</sup>

American Indian or Alaska Native - 0.97% (1)  
Asian - 7.77% (8)  
Black or African American - 12.62% (13)  
Latino - 29.13% (30)  
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander - 0% (0)  
Middle Eastern - 3.88% (4)  
White - 50.49% (52)  
Bi-racial/Multi-racial - 6.80% (7)  
Prefer not to answer - 2.91% (3)

## Religion/Spiritual Practice - 103 respondents<sup>2</sup>

Protestant - 14.56% (15)  
Roman Catholic - 20.39% (21)  
Mormon - 0.97% (1)  
Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox - 0.97% (1)  
Jewish - 11.65% (12)  
Muslim - 1.94% (2)  
Buddhist - 2.91% (3)  
Hindu - 0% (0)  
Atheist - 7.77% (8)  
Agnostic - 15.53% (16)  
Nothing in particular - 12.62% (13)  
Prefer not to answer - 2.91% (3)  
Christian - 5.83% (6)  
Evangelical - 0.97% (1)  
Non practicing Catholic - 0.97% (1)  
Non-practicing Jewish - 0.97% (1)  
I was raised Protestant. I lean toward Native American Spirituality - 0.97% (1)  
Spiritual/Christian - 0.97% (1)  
Unitarian Universalist - 0.97% (1)  
Baptist - 0.97% (1)

## Sexual Identity/Orientation - 103 respondents<sup>3</sup>

Aromantic - 0.97% (1)  
Asexual - 1.94% (2)  
Bisexual - 6.80% (7)  
Fluid - 0% (0)  
Gay - 4.85% (5)  
Lesbian - 6.80% (7)  
Pansexual - 0% (0)

Queer - 4.85% (5)  
Questioning or Unsure - 0% (0)  
Same-gender-loving - 0% (0)  
Straight (heterosexual) - 77.67% (80)  
Stud - 0% (0)  
Prefer not to answer - 0.97% (1)

## Are you an immigrant or first-generation American? - 103 respondents

Immigrant - 9.71% (10)  
First-generation - 24.27% (25)  
Both - 1.94% (2)  
No - 64.08% (66)  
Prefer not to answer - 0% (0)

## Age - 103 respondents

Up to 21 - 0% (0)  
22 - 29 - 3.88% (4)  
30 - 39 - 21.36% (22)  
40 - 49 - 34.95% (36)  
50 - 59 - 20.39% (21)  
60 - 69 - 11.65% (12)  
70 - 79 - 5.83% (6)  
80 - 89 - 0% (0)  
Prefer not to answer - 1.94% (2)

## Class Identity - 103 respondents

Upper class - 2.91% (3)  
Upper middle class - 33.01% (34)  
Middle class - 34.95% (36)  
Lower middle class or working poor - 21.36% (22)  
Poor - 6.80% (7)  
Prefer not to answer - 0% (0)  
Working poor - 0.97% (1)

## Disability Status - 103 respondents

Yes - 11.65% (12)  
No - 80.58% (83)  
Prefer not to answer - 7.77% (8)

<sup>1</sup> Some respondents picked multiple terms to describe their race and ethnicity.

<sup>2</sup> Some respondents picked multiple terms to describe their religion/spiritual practice or submitted their own terms.

<sup>3</sup> Some respondents picked multiple terms to describe their sexual identity/orientation.



# The results of our survey were sobering, but unfortunately not shocking.

Consistent with previous research, there are structural barriers that emanate from the political system itself and its gatekeepers—including media, political parties, and endorsing organizations—that are felt by women running for office. Social barriers stemming from systemic exclusion inform not only biases that women experience on the campaign trail—such as skepticism about their viability or opinions about their appearance—but motivate hostility like harassment, stalking and threats of violence toward them in disproportionate numbers. Many of these instances of hostility are explicitly sexual or gendered in nature.

The sum of these experiences understandably give rise to internal obstacles, adverse mental health and well-being impacts that this study is the first to explore, and valid safety concerns that have led a significant number of women candidates to change how they run their campaigns. While the majority of women we surveyed have not yet been pushed out of politics by the disproportionate hostility at them, the toll is measurable.



1. Women Are Still Treated as Outsiders on the Campaign Trail
2. Women Face Outsized Pressure and Hostility on the Campaign Trail
3. Women's Experiences with Hostility Often Related Directly to their Sex or Gender
4. Disproportionate Hostility Takes a Toll on Mental Health & Well-being
5. Disproportionate Hostility Causes Real Safety Concerns for Women Running for Office
6. Is Disproportionate Hostility Pushing Women Out of Politics?

# Women Are Still Treated as Outsiders On the Campaign Trail

Although women are running and winning throughout California, traditional gatekeepers of political power continue to exclude them. While candidate perceptions of their interactions with other groups, such as other elected officials, political parties, or the press were mixed, there were notable gender differences. A minority of candidates reported positive experiences undergoing endorsement processes, but our research showed a 7-point difference between the men who reported somewhat or very positive experiences going through endorsement processes (45.45%) compared to women (38.46%). And while a majority of candidates from all genders reported generally positive interactions with the press, our research showed a 10-point difference between the men who reported somewhat or very positive interactions with the media (63.64%) compared to women (53.85%). Negative pieces in the media generally were experienced more frequently by women: 26.92% of women and 30.95% of women of color reported frequent or very frequent negative media pieces while only 18.18% of men did.

Particularly notable in candidates' interactions with traditional gatekeepers of political power was how the concept of viability was wielded consistently against women rather than men. Nearly half (47.44%) of all women, half (50%) of women of color, and more than half (53.33%) of

LGBTQ+ women reported others questioning their credentials or viability frequently or very frequently, compared to less than one-third (31.82%) of men. And women reported experiencing skepticism more often—28.21% of women reported experiencing skepticism from voters or donors about their viability as a candidate frequently or very frequently, over triple the rate at which men did at only 9.09%. One woman survey respondent wrote, “Double standards and much higher expectations pervaded everything. From the media coverage to social media criticism. I got much more of it than the men I ran against.” Another reported,

“As a woman who reads younger than I am, I had my credentials questioned a lot. I’m just shy of 40 but people often acted like I was a recent college grad who was running just for shits and giggles.”

These findings are in alignment with opinion research indicating that most people still believe women leaders must do more to prove their worth (Parker, Horowitz and Igielnik 2018). The consistent message women receive from gatekeepers as they run for office is that they do not belong.

## #HERSTORIES

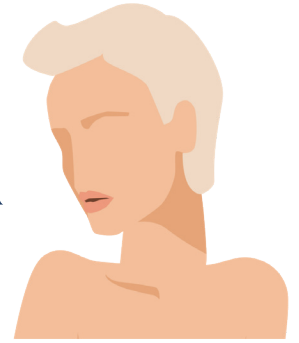
*I am the first and only woman who has ever held this office. In my first election, I was running against four men. I would notice that I would come to a debate or I would give a speech, and people didn't seem to hear what I had to say. What I was being judged on was what I was wearing or whether I had enough make-up on, but not what I had to say. The judgment was very different, being judged physically. I had someone from the Democratic Central Committee come up to me and say "you're not going to win, but I can put in a good word with one of the competitors so you could be his administrative assistant."*

*The second race was absolutely horrific. My opponent put things in the media, fabricated documents, and created situations that didn't exist. Then, he sued me six times personally. He sent people to my door to serve me with documents. My kids were fairly young, and he sent someone to my house who actually talked to my child. He asked where they went to school and what their sports were. And I remember running out and saying, "Who are you? What are you doing? Why are you talking to my kid?" And then he served me with papers. These are lawsuits that came at me personally. I could have lost my house. He has all of my personal information, my social security number, and it was devastating.*

*I look back on it now and I wish I hadn't run for my second term, despite all the good work I've done. I put my family in jeopardy because of this person. And there's just not a lot of sympathy. **What I've heard from people is "this is what I signed up for." No, I did not.** I did not sign up to lose my home. I didn't sign up to put my children in the line of fire of people I don't know.*



# Women Face Outsized Pressure and Hostility on the Campaign Trail



Reinforcing the systemic exclusion of women from politics is the social pressure put on women to change themselves when they run for office. Women were more than twice as likely to report feeling pressured frequently or very frequently to change physical aspects of themselves (e.g. clothing, hair, bodily compartment) during their campaign, with 41.03% of women, and 45.24% of women of color, receiving that pressure compared to 18.18% of men. Women discussed receiving comments about their appearance, race, weight gain, perceived youth, hair color, and more. As one woman respondent put it, “Body image issues were constant.” This reflects the tendency for women politicians to receive more attention about their appearance by others such as the media (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). Similarly, one-third (33.33%) of women, and 38.10% of women of color, reported feeling pressure to change aspects of their personality (e.g. demeanor, displays of emotion, mannerisms, speech patterns) frequently or very frequently, as compared to 22.73% of men. One woman respondent who reported feeling pressured to change both her physical appearance and personality described an incident where another woman involved in local politics supported her candidacy but commented that she was “too blonde”; she reported the mixed judgments she received on the campaign

with some people telling her she was “too serious,” while others told her she “wasn’t serious enough.” Women running for office are not accepted as they are.

The judgment and pressure women receive running for office can escalate quickly to overt hostility. Verbal abuse in online forums such as social media or email was the most frequently reported form of hostility experienced by all candidates, with more than 80% of respondents experiencing online abuse at least once and over 40% experiencing it frequently or very frequently. LGBTQ+ women reported experiencing this at an even greater rate, with 93.33% experiencing online abuse at least once.

When this online and verbal abuse escalates, women disproportionately feel the effects. One woman explained how she eventually had to file a restraining order against a man who at first called her office, wrote derogatory social media comments, and yelled at her during board meetings, and then “finally threatened to shoot me at my home.” While fortunately severe examples of hostile experiences such as violent threats, harassment, physical violence and stalking were reported less frequently than online or verbal abuse, the gender disparity in these more severe categories of hostility is more stark, especially for women of color and LGBTQ+ women.

Nearly two-thirds (65.38%) of all women respondents (73.33% of LGBTQ+ women) reported ex-

periencing harassment during their campaign at least once, while 50% of men did. While 72.73% of men never experienced stalking, and most of those who did experienced it only rarely, 42.31% of all women respondents, 54.76% of women of color, and 53.33% of LGBTQ+ women reported experiencing stalking at least once and nearly one in five (17.95%) of all women and a disturbing 28.57% of women of color reported experiencing stalking frequently or very frequently. Additionally, 43.59% of all wom-

en, 47.62% of women of color and a shocking two-thirds of LGBTQ+ women reported receiving violent threats at least once during their campaign, as compared to 36.36% of men. Finally, over one quarter (25.64%) of all women, one third (33.33%) of LGBTQ+ women, and over one-third (35.71%) of women of color experienced physical violence directed toward them on the campaign trail, compared to just 13.64% of men. As the level of violence increased, women faced hostility at nearly double the rate of men.

## #HERSTORIES

*When I ran for office, the thought never crossed my mind that there could be mental health impacts. But I have received so many racist, misogynistic, disturbing messages that I've honestly lost count. I remember someone saying I should "go walk 50 miles south," implying I should return to Mexico. And it's not just online, someone pulled up outside my home and began taking photos. It's terrifying.*

*I'm very open about being in therapy, and I'm constantly learning about myself but looking back on the patterns and triggers I realized that I went through a depressive episode. My husband insisted we go on vacation. We went to a dance bar. I love to dance. I saw everyone so happy and I was so sad and I literally started crying. Part of my feeling so sad was the fear that I was actually depressed in a way that I had never felt before. This episode was fueled by the vitriol and toxicity that would continue throughout the campaign.*

*With growing attention, for me the most frustrating part has been people's responses "it comes with the territory" "this is politics" "this is how it is" That's the most difficult pill to swallow that people are validating that these things happen because "that's just how it is." But a white male taking pictures of a young woman's living quarters is not ok. **Part of me running such a different campaign is being able to call this out as not being ok.***

# Women's Experiences with Hostility Often Related Directly to their Sex or Gender

While the disproportionate hostility that women face on the campaign trail can have many causes, sex and gender were direct, motivating factors. Over two-thirds of women (70.51%) reported encountering adverse experiences specifically related to their sex, gender, gender identity, or gender expression sometimes, frequently, or very frequently. Less than half of men (40.91%) reported the same. And while 63.64% of men reported they never encountered adverse experiences of a sexual nature (e.g. sexual harassment, violence, unwanted commentary), just 33.33% of women (30.95% of women of color, and 26.67% of LGBTQ+ women) reported the same, meaning two-thirds of all women respondents—and even more women of color and LGBTQ+ women—experienced adverse experiences of a sexual nature at least once on the campaign trail. Nearly half (47.44%) of all women, over half (52.38%) of women of color, and a full two-thirds of LGBTQ+ women specifically reported experiencing verbal abuse or threats of a sexual nature during their campaign, while just 18.18% of men did.

Despite most women respondents (65.38%) describing interactions with voters overall as either somewhat or very positive, several wrote about uncomfortable or hostile inter-

actions while canvassing in their communities that felt gender-based. As one woman respondent described, “While canvassing, many men made sexual comments.” Similarly, another respondent reported that “It was uncomfortable to receive comments from men when knocking doors and being by myself.” Yet another woman respondent wrote,

“I don’t think the voter I spoke to would have brought my dating life into the conversation if I were a different gender.”

Chillingly, one woman respondent explained, “We had a stalker so I could not walk alone. He was arrested and he’s still in custody.”

Women of color and LGBTQ+ women face compounded difficulties. As one woman recounted,

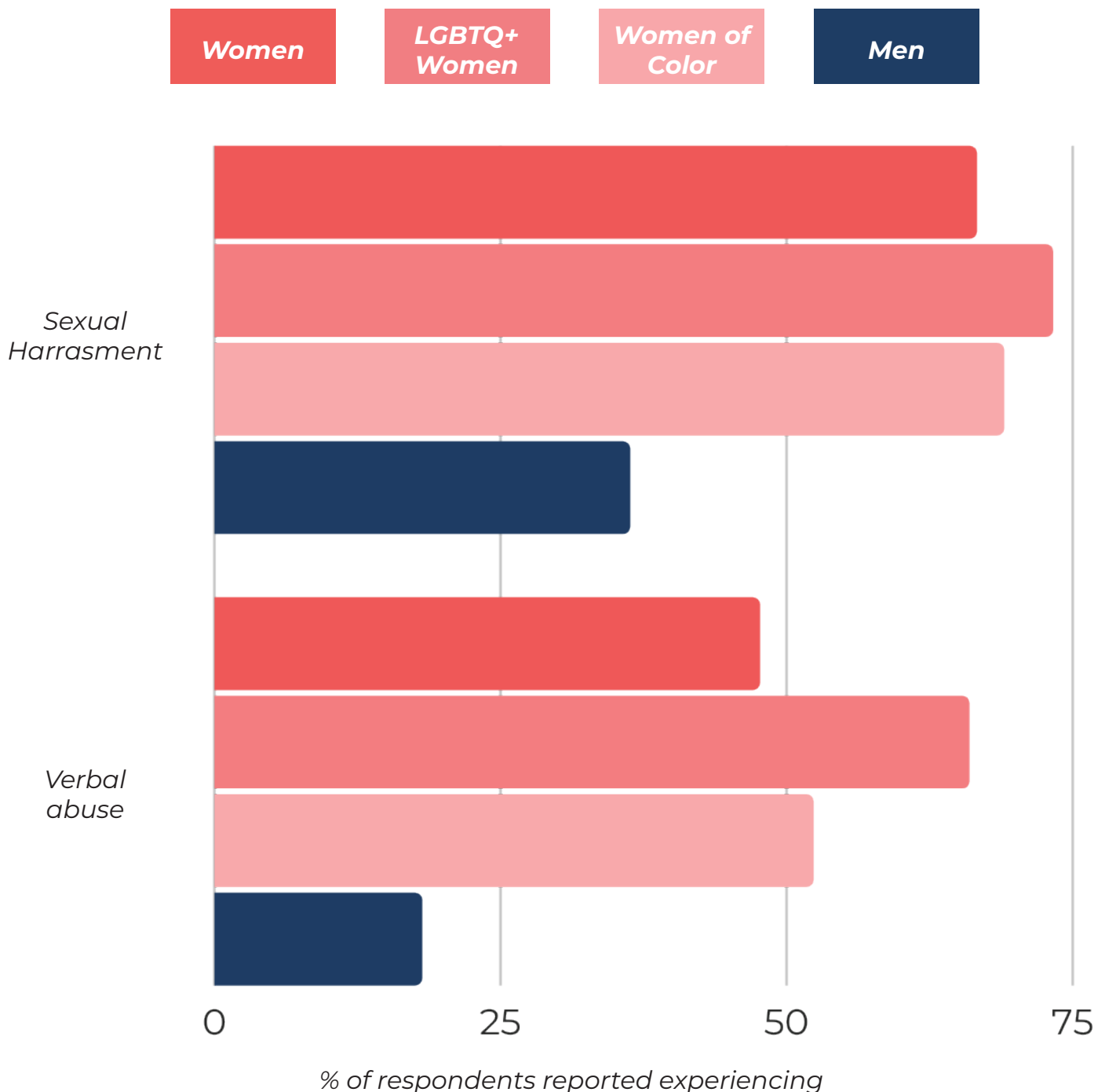
“I was told over and over again I would not get their votes due to me being lesbian. I had people ask me straight up at the door, ‘are you the lesbian one,’ before shutting the door in my face.”

Others described experiences that were indicative of sexism and/or racism. A South Asian Muslim candidate wrote that while her ethnic identity did not seem to affect the voters, her opponent stated, “she’s not from this country, so she doesn’t represent this district.”

Among men, LGBTQ+ men reported similar concerns about being attacked for their sexuality and gender expression. One described being attacked for “not being able to be ‘manly’ enough for the position I was going for,” while another reported similarly, “Sometimes voters would tell me that my voice/laugh was too high (I’m a gay man with an affect that may not read ‘masculine’ all the time).” A third described incidents in which his campaign signs were vandalized, saying “I was a target of hate

speech, with ‘groomer’ sprayed on one sign and other signs damaged, likely in response to my queer identity.”

The sum of these responses and stories show that the degree and nature of hostility faced by candidates is motivated to some degree by their sex and gender—affecting not only women but also LGBTQ+ men—often in combination with other aspects of candidates’ identities, like race and sexual orientation.



# Disproportionate Hostility Takes a Toll on Mental Health & Well-being

Facing such hostility—ranging from verbal abuse to harassment and stalking to overt violence—takes a toll on mental health and well-being, felt by all genders. Approximately 80% of all respondents reported experiencing new mental health or wellness-related symptoms that they believed were caused, in whole or in part, by hostility experienced during their campaigns. The most commonly experienced problems were sleep disturbance and fatigue, followed by excessive anxiety and worry and diminished ability to think or concentrate.

Gender disparities in the experiences of mental health effects indicate the burden felt by women candidates in particular. Nearly two-thirds (65.38%) of all women respondents and 80% of LGBTQ+ women reported frequent or very frequent sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or restless sleep) during their campaigns compared to just 27.27% of men. Similarly, 50% of women (60% of LGBTQ+ women) reported frequently or very frequently experiencing excessive anxiety and worry compared to 36.36% of men. Even more disparate, frequent or very frequent fatigue or loss of energy was reported

by 64.10% of women (73.33% of LGBTQ+ women) but just 22.73% of men candidates.

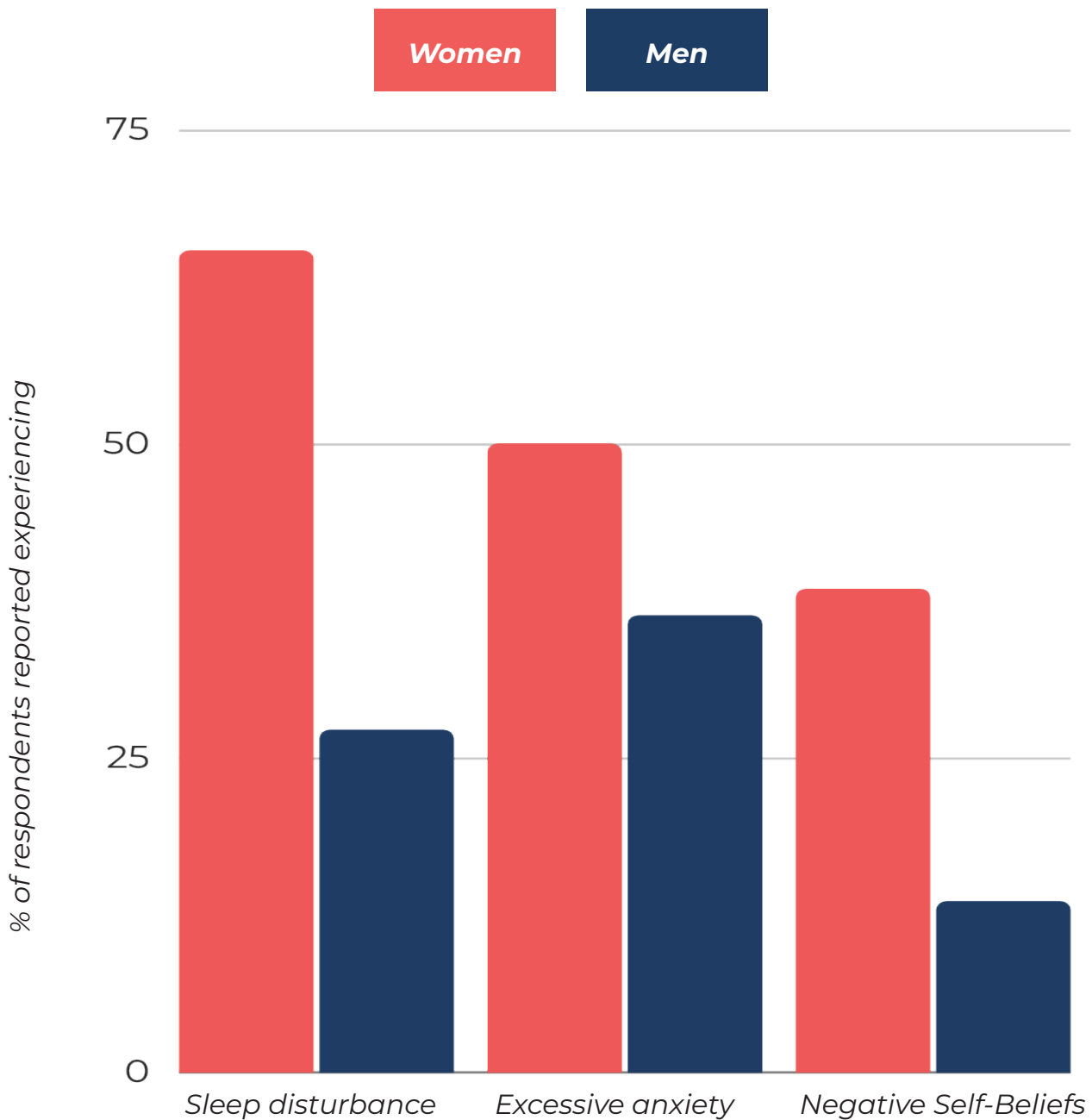
Hostility experienced on the campaign trail affected women's feelings about themselves and the world. Almost triple the number of women reported frequently or very frequently experiencing persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about themselves, others, or the world (e.g. "I am bad," "No one can be trusted," "My nervous system is ruined") compared to men (38.46% of women compared to 13.64% of men). LGBTQ+ women experienced this even more often, with more than half (53.33%) reporting frequent or very frequent persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs. Finally, a persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame) was reported as a frequent or very frequent occurrence by 26.92% of all women and 33.33% of both women of color and LGBTQ+ women, but just 9.09% of men

Even where significant gender disparities were not immediately apparent, an alarming share of candidates experienced severe mental health symptoms. Similar proportions of men candidates (45.45%) and women candidates (43.59%) reported



experiencing recurrent, unexpected panic attacks during their campaign at least once, and the rates are even higher for women of color (52.38%) and LGBTQ+ women (60%). A greater proportion of women candidates (16.67% overall, 23.81% of women of color, 20% of LGBTQ+ women) than men candidates (4.55%) reported experiencing these frequently or very frequently. Similarly, half of women candidates (50% of all women, 52.38% of women of color and 60% of LGBTQ+ women) and nearly half of men candidates (45.45%) reported experiencing dissociative reactions (e.g. flashbacks) in

which they felt or acted as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring at least once during their campaign. A higher percentage of women candidates (14.10%) than men candidates (4.55%) reported frequently or very frequently experiencing these, and women of color reported experiencing dissociative reactions most frequently of all, with nearly one in four (23.81%) reporting experiencing them frequently or very frequently. The adversity faced by candidates, particularly women, takes a serious toll.



# Disproportionate Hostility Causes Real Safety Concerns for Women Running for Office

The hostility that women disproportionately face on the campaign trail not only affects them personally but can meaningfully impact campaign strategy and tactics. Nearly half of all women respondents (44.87%)—including 46.67% of LGBTQ+ women and 47.62% of women of color—reported modifying their campaign strategies due to safety or well-being concerns, while less than one-third of men (31.82%) reported the same.

Many women changed their online behaviors because the abuse they receive has caused them to feel unsafe. Verbal abuse in online forums has unfortunately become a near-ubiquitous experience for all candidates, but it disproportionately raises safety concerns for women. When those who experienced online abuse were asked how concerned for their personal safety it caused them to be, 25.64% of all women respondents and one-third of LGBTQ+ women reported feeling very or extremely concerned, while zero men respondents did. As one woman wrote, “I have regular adrenaline spikes and rapid heart beat when I leave my house for fear I will see someone in my neighborhood who will feel entitled to say things in real life that they said to me on social media. It’s a horrible feeling.” Online and verbal abuse has real effects

on candidates’ campaign strategies. One woman noted, “I had to have a partner join me for door knocking after a man threatened me at his door. I felt the hit pieces were so de-humanizing that I became an easy target for violence.” Multiple women reported that while they believed they could make positive change in office, they did not want to run again because of how bad their experiences were.

Disproportionate threats of violence also caused women great concern for their personal safety. Nearly one quarter (23.08%) of women (28.57% of women of color, 26.67% of LGBTQ+ women) reported that threats of violence caused them to feel moderately, very, or extremely concerned for their safety while only 9.09% of men reported the same. One woman wrote, “harassment from an opponent in my race made me feel so unsafe I resorted to carrying a knife with me when I left the house....I still am afraid of him.” Another woman stated,

“I almost quit my campaign when I received a validated threat from someone who stated that they wanted to kill me and my family. I couldn’t sleep, I didn’t eat, I worried excessively. I asked local law enforcement to

determine if the person owned a firearm and law enforcement told me they were not able to help or share that information with me.”

While fewer men respondents reported modifying their campaign strategies due to safety or well-being concerns, it should be noted that some men also described incidents of violence or threats. One man provided the chilling example that, “there was an attempt to burn my apartment down by an unknown person at night while I was asleep.”

These responses show how safety concerns impact candidates in practical ways that make campaigning more difficult and adversely affect their mental health and well-being. Women described modifications including having trusted escorts or security accompany them at events, not canvassing in the evening or alone, reducing or eliminating their social media use, and attempting to keep their address secret by removing the option to mail fundraising checks to their home from their campaign materials or petitioning to remove their address from public records. These modifications could very well impact the success of a campaign.

## #HERSTORIES

*I think I was naive about running. I had held several elected offices before and so I didn't think there would be a question as to whether or not I can lead. But that felt like an undergirding question of this last campaign, particularly in endorsement interviews. In talking to political clubs and delegates, you could feel the double standard. There was little interest in the historic nature of my race or in the milestones I had met, like raising \$1 million in the first year of the race. That was treated like luck. **Expectations were always set higher and my viability was always in question.***

*This goes back to how I was socialized as a Black girl growing up in the public education system in San Francisco. I was always the only one or two in my honors classes, and always being the only one, it can break you or strengthen you. We have risen above and part of my success has to do with faith and really having a tight family unit and good friends - that level of support.*

***But I realized through this campaign that we do not train candidates on mental fatigue.*** *We do not talk about fatigue. With the strong Black woman trope, there is no room for vulnerability. We need to start to talk about the mental health of candidates running for office - not just as a women's issue because men go through it too. Campaigns take their toll on everyone.*

# Is Disproportionate Hostility Pushing Women Out of Politics?

Despite many negative experiences (and half of respondents' campaign outcomes being ultimately unsuccessful), 66% of respondents said they would consider running for elected office again, including 72.73% of men and 64.10% of women. This relatively high percentage could be viewed as a potential indicator of the overall positivity of most respondent candidates' experiences (or at least that, for the majority, the negative aspects of their campaign were not bad enough to push them out of politics entirely).

However, focusing only on the overall percentage misses what those who answered "no" or "maybe" went through and why they answered that way. When asked to expand on their answers, one woman respondent stated:

"I have run successfully for two local and non-partisan races. I recently ran and lost...it broke me. The negativity, the lack of support from the Party, the financial investment that I am still recovering from, the rebuilding of family relationships, it was all too much. I am not sure I want to put my family through it or myself through it again. My health suffered—I now have

high blood pressure. My mental health suffered—I have anxiety in my own neighborhood, I am depressed, and my confidence is gone."

This experienced candidate was overwhelmed by the negativity she experienced and its impact on her physical and mental health.

It is not an insignificant number of surveyed candidates, of all genders, who have been deterred from running again because of the personal impacts of hostility on the campaign trail: indeed, one-third of respondents. And this data does not capture the number of potential new candidates, particularly women, who self-select out because they do not want to subject themselves to this hostility.



The culture and acceptance of hostility on the campaign trail is taking an unacceptable toll on candidates'

mental health,

well-being,

and sense of personal safety,

and when these candidates self-select out of politics, we all lose out on the potential of their leadership.

If we want leadership that reflects the rich diversity of California, then we need to build a political culture that accepts and uplifts underrepresented candidates.



Our democracy depends on it.

# The hostility faced by candidates, particularly women, on the campaign trail is a real problem affecting candidates' mental health and well-being.

Addressing this issue means changing our political culture and our tolerance of abuse toward candidates. Everyone—from PACs to political parties and leaders to endorsing organizations to press to voters and members of the public—has a role to play in making these large-scale culture shifts.

*Below are recommendations developed in collaboration with political leaders, advocates, and organizations to provide support to candidates whose mental health and well-being has been understandably affected by California's current political culture and to change this political culture.*

## 1. The California State Legislature could change our laws to allow campaign funds to be used for mental health services.

Approximately 80% of all candidates developed new mental health symptoms they believed were caused in whole or in part by the hostility they faced during their campaigns. Because this campaign culture is creating new mental health needs, we recommend passing legislation to allow candidates to use campaign funds for mental health services, such as therapy. Recently, California became the first state to allow campaign funds to be used for child-care, recognizing that many candidates (disproportionately women) had increased child-care needs on the campaign trail that could affect their ability to run. This is a similar situation, in which the new mental health needs caused by campaign culture are having real impacts on candidates, particularly women, and how they must structure their campaigns. Allowing funds to be spent on mental health services will allow candidates to seek support to help offset the toll of hostility on the campaign trail.

## 2. The California State Legislature could empower the California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) with authority to redress campaign tactics that constitute fraud, harassment, threats, or incitement of violence against candidates.

Much of the hostility that candidates experience on the campaign trail emanates from individuals or organizations in the political ecosystem, from opponents to independent expenditure committees. Because these individuals and organizations must answer to the FPPC, the FPPC can play a greater role in redressing fraud, harassment, threats, or incitement of violence against candidates. The FPPC should be given authority to define what constitutes fraud, harassment, threats, or incitement of violence against candidates, consistent with legal protections for political speech, and set out processes and penalties to redress violations. For example, the FPPC could prohibit publication of a candidates' personal address on campaign mail and levy significant fines against organizations that are using this as a tactic to endanger candidates' personal safety.

## 3. Social media companies could implement and enforce stricter standards to curb abuse against candidates.

Online abuse was the most common form of hostility experienced by candidates, affecting 80% of candidates of all genders. Studies have shown that women face twice as much abuse on platforms like Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2022). Social media companies have significant ability to define standards for conduct that will be accepted on their private platforms and a responsibility to curb abuse of candidates. Social media companies can implement stricter standards defining abuse and threats and devote dedicated resources to monitoring candidates' accounts to prevent and address the abuse targeted at them.

## 4. Press could cover harassment and abuse of candidates to keep attention on this serious issue.

Although significant numbers of candidates face hostility running for office, the media has not covered this as the serious problem that it is. By shining a light on the issues of campaign hostility—particularly the disproportionate hostility that women, candidates of color, and LGBTQ+ candidates face—press could help change the narrative so that these issues are not overlooked or dismissed.

## 5. Political consultants and endorsing organizations could be encouraged to receive training on candidate mental health and be subject to accountability measures if they contribute to abuse against candidates.

Hostility faced on the campaign trail affects not only candidates personally but their campaign decisions: nearly half of women candidates reported changing their campaign tactics because of hostility they faced. As the individuals who often work most closely with candidates, consultants in particular should be trained on the types of abuse that candidates face (particularly, women, candidates of color, and LGBTQ+ candidates), the potential impacts on mental health, and strategies to support candidates coping with hostility during their campaigns. Additionally, consultants and consultant organizations like the American Association of Political Consultants can play an important role in holding other consultants accountable if they perpetuate hostility.

## 6. Organizations that train and support women running for office could increase support and training on addressing hostility, particularly online abuse.

There is a strong ecosystem of organizations that train women to run for office—such as Emerge California, EMILY’s List, Close the Gap, Run Women Run, Vote Run Lead, She Should Run, Latinas Represent, Hispanas Organized for Political Empowerment, and Black Women’s Institute for Leadership Development—and that support women once they are running for office, including California Women’s List, Fund Her, Elect Democratic Women, National Women’s Political Caucus, Vote Mama, Her Bold Move, Latinas Lead, Higher Heights for America, A Pipeline Project, California Black Women’s Democratic Club, Democratic Women’s Club of San Diego County, and San Francisco Women’s Political Committee. Organizations that train women to run for office can build modules to train women on strategies for coping with and responding to online abuse. Organizations that support women running for office can mobilize volunteers to call out abuse, misinformation, and disinformation online that is targeted at women.





## 7. Organizations that train and support women running for office could support and build space for women to be in community with each other and discuss the hostility they have faced and its impacts.

As part of this pilot project, California Women's List created a confidential space for a small group of respondents to talk about their experiences on the campaign trail facilitated by licensed mental health professional Jocelyn Tapia, LMFT. This was a supportive, positive space where candidates could build community with each other through their common experiences and develop strategies for coping with the adversity they faced and its impacts. Groups supporting women could build a referral list of mental health professionals who can provide group or individual mental health services for women running for office. And groups supporting women can help build space for women to come together and talk about their experiences with each other. Running for office can be such an isolating experience that this space can allow women to find support in each other.

The disproportionate hostility that women face running for office is unacceptable and the toll on mental health and well-being is entirely understandable. While women are increasingly running for office and winning, these victories should not come at such a high cost to women's well-being and personal safety. We need to build a political culture where women don't just persevere, they prosper.

**We invite you to build this new political culture  
with us.**

California Women's List is a Political Action Committee that endorses, fundraises for, and elects women to public office in California.

Our mission is to elect women who will make California more just and equitable for all.



[californiawomenslist.org](http://californiawomenslist.org)

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